

Seven Tips For Effective Advocacy

How to talk effectively to a legislator? The same way that you talk to patients so that they understand: simple and direct advice and assistance. However, your patients look to you to give the “correct” advice whereas an elected official wants your point of view and then he or she decides whether it is the “correct” point of view. To be an effective advocate, you must be **fair, concise, respectful and gracious**. Here are some useful tips:

1. **Keep It Simple:** A Maryland legislator is confronted with over 2,500 bills in a General Assembly Session and is lobbied continuously by hundreds of interest groups on a dizzying array of issues. Health care issues may constitute only 15% of the subject matter the average legislator must absorb. Do not assume that health care and its peculiar vocabulary (HMO, PPO, ERISA, peer reviewed, cap on non-economic damages, etc) is well known. When asking for assistance, describe the problem simply so that a person of average intelligence would understand the issue.
2. **Be Fair:** There are two sides to every story so be candid and tell the legislator the other side. Also tell the legislator the reason that the other side is incorrect. The legislator will hear the “other side” and so prior inoculation is helpful.
3. **Be Respectful:** Legislators have worked hard to attain their position and are entitled to respectful discourse. Too often, doctors are described as “arrogant.” You must guard against this perception and the surest way to do so is to speak simply, directly and fairly. Let the legislator know that they will likely hear a contrary position to that which you are expressing but that you are confident that, once they have heard all arguments, they will accept your proposed solution.
4. **Brief is Better:** In both writing and speaking, too often people substitute length for clarity. The best letter is usually the shortest where a person has spent sufficient time to “make it short” without losing its fundamental and essential meaning. It usually takes more time to be brief than not. Take the time to make your oral and written communications brief. It will be much appreciated by a legislator who is daily meeting hundreds of people and dealing with scores of issues.
5. **Be Gracious Not Threatening:** Certain people, when they do not get their way, become vindictive and threatening (“I’ll make sure the entire medical community

doesn't vote for you"). This is not a way to either win friends or influence people and almost always backfires. The correct reply is: "Thank you for your time; I'm sorry that you don't agree with us on this but perhaps there will be other issues where we can agree." Threats NEVER work (additionally, people who make threats are almost never able to carry them through successfully).

6. **Don't Lose Your Cool:** Legislators, like all of us, have bad days when they are rude or inconsiderate. Keep your head while those around you are losing theirs.
7. **Politics is a Marathon Not a Sprint:** In any given year, the General Assembly may consider 150 to 200 separate items of legislation or budgetary items that affect medical practice in Maryland: The key to effectiveness in the Legislature is to remember that the process is complex and ongoing and is measured not by the passage or defeat of a single bill, but rather the ongoing direction of legislative activity. In a word, it is a marathon race where the victory will belong to the runner who is the most persistent and consistent.